

The Sinai Project

Photo by SGM Richard Wickman



By SSG David Abrams

SSG Stephen Strickland couldn't reach out and touch his Primary Leadership Development Course students because they were more than 9,000 miles away, but that didn't stop the Ft. Bliss Noncommissioned Officers Academy instructor from making sure the 32 "NCO wannabes" got some of the best leadership training the Army has to offer via a ground-breaking course that used cameras, computers and fiber optics.

Thanks to a two-way video-satellite link, Strickland could stare directly into a camera in a specially designed studio-classroom at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy and teach Reserve Component soldiers sitting in a classroom in the Sinai Desert with only about two seconds of transmission delay.

The satellite-linked PLDC was to be one of the first steps in Force XXI, the Army-wide push to turn 20th-century soldiers into 21st-century techno-warriors before the century even turns. Gadgetry aside, USASMA officials be-

lieve these initial classes of PLDC could very well change the face of the classroom phase of all future NCOES instruction.

Known informally around the halls of USASMA as "the Sinai project," the landmark PLDC was a video teletraining pilot for the Reserve Component, said SGM Dan Hubbard, Directorate of Training sergeant major. "We're using the technology to project what we'd normally do in classrooms here to a distant campus," he added.

Distance learning is spreading like wildfire in an Army which is already moving from individual posts to a worldwide military community linked by the information superhighway and the fax machine. SGM Richard Wickman, PLDC course evaluator for USASMA's Directorate of Evaluation and Standardization, said television network courses are being developed for Defense Language Institute and Infantry Officer Advanced courses. "This type of training has got a lot of uses," he said. "All the soldiers I talked to in the Sinai were impressed that the Army has the capability to do something like this."

Broadcasting from a studio in Texas to relay stations in Virginia and New Jersey then over to the Sinai classroom required only slight modifications in the course presentation.

"For the first couple of days I had to get used to the microphones and the cameras, but after that it was just like teaching any other PLDC class," said Strickland, a PLDC instructor for three years. "It took a little while to get to know each soldier's personality because I wasn't circulating around the classroom, but it didn't take long to know which students were always prepared and which ones needed a little extra attention."

The U.S. Army Reserve and Army National Guard soldiers—part of the 4th Bn, 505th Parachute Inf Reg, 82nd Airborne Div, which deployed in January to the desert for a Multinational Force and Observers rotation—took PLDC while at the MFO base camp after spending three weeks patrolling the Egypt-Israel border as part of the peace-keeping operation. The unit was comprised of 72 percent Guard volunteers eight percent Reserve volunteers and 20

percent Regular Army soldiers.

"In one sense, this was a tougher-than-average PLDC because these soldiers had a real-world mission—they came out of the field from their patrolling and observation posts and the very next day they were in the classroom; then, the day after they graduated, they were right back out in the field," Wickman said.

Wickman was on-site in the desert for the first of three TNET PLDCs to ensure the course was taught to Army standards. "Before I went to the Sinai, I was really skeptical," he said. "I didn't think anything like this could be taught over TNET. But I have to admit, I saw a transformation take place—there was a real connection between the instructor and his students. SSG Strickland really brought these soldiers together as part of the small-group process."

USASMA, the proponent agency for PLDC, took the lead in designing the course for television presentation in mid-December 1994 when Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) officials made the decision to provide junior leadership training to the deployed soldiers. USASMA officials then contracted for training support materials which could be transmitted over the network, including colorful graphics and a "television script" for instructors to use as a guide when conducting class.

The 200 instructional slides used in most PLDC classrooms mushroomed to more than 700 visual graphics which were also presented to each student in a special note-taking book.

"This was something that had never been done before over this great of a distance," Wickman said.

The long-distance transmission between Ft. Bliss and the Sinai, the first of its kind in the NCOES, is an example of the impact technology has on today's Army. Using a complicated system of satellite hookups, 150 hours of PLDC classes were beamed into two temporary classrooms on the other side of the world. Strickland gauged the reaction of his Sinai students by simply glancing up at the two video screens in front of him.

Although the VTT process has been used in other locations, USASMA officials said this was the first time a complete distance-learning package was presented to students.

Strickland had four different camera angles in the two classrooms to monitor the students' facial reactions and classwork. "Through remote control, I can move the cameras around and zoom in on their nametags or see what they're writing in their notebooks," he said.

The instructor at USASMA could also use the camera to show slides and play instructional videotapes to enhance the classroom experience for the Sinai students.

Four assistant small group leaders stood by in the classrooms to pick up where Strickland left off once the satellite transmission switched off for the day or if the system ever went down (something which only happened once during the first course). Those hands-on portions of PLDC which could not be taught over the airwaves—such as land navigation, drill and ceremony and the field training exercise—were under the control of the ASGLs who also administered written exams and evaluated the students' performance on leadership tasks.

Along with sitting in the classroom, the RC soldiers had the usual stresses of PLDC once the TV screen went blank.

"We tried to create, as best we could, a demanding NCO academy environment," Wickman said. "These soldiers

Soldiers in the Sinai complete PLDC via TNET from a classroom 9,000 miles away in Texas—all the while performing a real-world mission.

still did barracks maintenance and had inspections just like any other PLDC students."

The first long-distance PLDC was conducted in early March with other iterations of the leadership course following in May and June. This gave the deployed RC soldiers from 26 states a golden opportunity to climb the first step

on the NCOES ladder. Normally, RC soldiers must attend the course at an NCO academy during their annual training after completing a written pre-resident package. With the state-of-the-art PLDC, the RC soldiers received firsthand instruction from an Active Component NCO—another "first" for the project.

For SPC Tracy Zimmerman, a Reservist from Orange, TX, the leadership course was a highlight in his tour-of-duty in the desert. "This is like a bonus for me," he said during a break in his map reading class. "I just came here to the Sinai for the mission and now being able to take PLDC is like icing on the cake."

Distance learning is not without its critics, however—many of whom feel the computer chip will take the heart and soul out of leadership training. "I had some initial concerns," said SGM Charles Keller, chief of USASMA's PLDC Curriculum Development Branch. "The technology's great and certainly applicable to many different things in the Army, but I don't think anyone's advocating the replacement of anything in NCOES with distance learning."

Despite the oceans and continents separating the teacher from his students, Keller said the quality of education remained the same. In fact, the ratio of students to instructors was slightly higher than the average PLDC.

"These soldiers in the Sinai got the same training as any other Reserve Component soldiers who go through PLDC," Hubbard said. "They were evaluated on the same tasks and held to the same standards—only the conditions were different."

Of the 96 students who began the landmark courses, only nine failed, Keller said.

While the jury is still out on whether or not distance learning will win approval from the Department of the Army, Wickman cautioned, "I would never want to see TNET replace traditional NCOES schools because we can get a lot out of the personal interaction the instructor has with his students. However, for remote sites, you can't beat this type of opportunity." ■

Abrams is senior journalist for The NCO Journal.